

I'm glad that the Commonwealth is seeking insights from the public to inform long-term options to uplift its capabilities.

I'm an active participant in community groups that focus on how we can do the most good with the money we donate to charity, with our careers, and with how we interact with our democracy.

One of the big issues of our time is catastrophic and existential risk. A number of books discuss this in detail including: What's the Worst That Could Happen by Andrew Leigh; Global Catastrophic Risks by Bostrom and Cirkovic; and The Precipice: Existential Risk and the Future of Humanity by Toby Ord.

Before I engaged with this topic in detail, I had assumed that risks like pandemics or nuclear war or global famines or space weather were more of a curiosity than a present danger. After engaging with the topic, I learned that these hazards are not as unlikely as I would have guessed and far more consequential. Some of the stats are alarming. **Overall, the risks these kinds of hazards pose to me and other Australians are orders of magnitude more than risks like fires, floods and cyclones.** This is very concerning to me, particularly because I care about ensuring that humanity has a flourishing future well beyond my lifetime. **We cannot be** the generation that drops the ball when so many before ours have struggled with so much less and yet survived.

It follows that Commonwealth planning and capability development should give special focus to these risks.

Both Andrew Leigh and Toby Ord are Australians and experts on this topic - so it might be sensible for the Government to reach out to them and seek their views to inform the conversation.

My experience is that the public and political conversation in Australia focuses on hazards based on how likely they are, and neglects the overall picture of risk. I think Commonwealth capability would provide better value for money and better service to Australians if it was based on a more complete understanding of risk.

To help paint that picture, **the chance of the average Australian dying from floods, fires and storms combined is less than the risk of dying by falling off a ladder.** Even if climate change doubles the risk of these disasters, ladders would still be more dangerous.

Meanwhile, the chance of the average Australian dying in a catastrophic disaster is at least 15 times more than their chance of dying in a traffic accident (see the Good Ancestors Policy submission). That is, **catastrophic disasters could be about 1000 times as dangerous as fires, floods and storms combined.**

Government is right to invest more in transport safety than in ladder safety, because one is more risky than the other. It follows that the National Emergency Management Agency should be far more concerned with preventing and preparing for catastrophic hazards than hazards like fires, floods and storms. Despite that, reading NEMA's publications, its focus on hazards seems disconnected from the actual risk of those hazards. **Catastrophic and existential disasters represent the vast majority of the risk, but are almost entirely neglected.**

To give a specific example, I was shocked to learn that no funding from the Commonwealth's Disaster Ready Fund has gone to mitigating natural catastrophic disasters, and almost half went to address bushfires specifically. Given the DRF's objective is to reduce the exposure to risk and

that data-driven evidence and value for money are key considerations in decision-making, it's hard to understand how this could be the outcome.

I'd like to offer two recommendations that could start to address the concerns I've raised above:

- Under the “shared responsibility model” States and Territories are taking a “bottom-up” approach to risk – focusing on frequent kinds of disasters at a community level. Given that, **the Commonwealth should take a “top-down” approach**. The Commonwealth should think on the all-hazards spectrum about what the big risks are, and tackle the hard problem of planning for and building the capability necessary to tackle those big risks. As we learned from COVID-19, the tools you need to combat a catastrophic risk aren't the same as a more common risk, but more. Often it will require special capability and special approaches. This might include understanding supply chains and critical infrastructure and being able to shape them as a crisis requires. The Commonwealth focusing on big risks first is essential to ensuring we can tackle all the coming hazards and maximise the amount of risk we reduce per dollar spent.
- We can't make effective and impactful decisions about risk mitigations if we build arbitrary distinctions into our policies and programs. The most powerful mitigations work across multiple hazard types. If we limit programs to “natural hazards” or projects led by individual jurisdictions we will be inefficient. Powerful and scalable interventions around food security and infrastructure resilience are likely neglected because they are good against many hazards rather than excellent against a single hazard. Government should stop limiting programs to “natural hazards” unless there is an overwhelming justification.

I'm not alone in worrying much more about catastrophic and existential risks than hazards we regrettably see every year. I regularly talk to family, friends and others in my community groups about these kinds of risks. Russia's invasion of Ukraine was cause for concern. Indeed, the reason the ADF wants to do less in this space is precisely because it's worrying more about global risks and conflict. While there are things I can do to stay safe from daily hazards, **I need Government to keep me and my family safe from global and catastrophic risks**. I trust that Government will take that duty seriously.

Thank you,
Kieren Watkins.